

Message Text

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FOR M/O AND M ONLY FROM DCM HORAN

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SUBJECT: ARABIC LANGUAGE TRAINING

REF: STATE 258719

SUMMARY: THE FSI FIELD SCHOOL SHOULD UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES BE CONCENTRATED EXCLUSIVELY IN WASHINGTON. ONE CAN LEARN TO READ ARABIC IN THE UNITED STATES, BUT SPOKEN ARABIC IS SO FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT FROM WESTERN LANGUAGES THAT IT CAN ONLY SUCCESSFULLY BE LEARNED IN THE MIDDLE EAST. OF THE POSSIBLE SITES FOR A RELOCATED FSI (IF BEIRUT IS DEFINITELY OUT) WE WOULD SUGGEST AMMAN, CAIRO AND DAMASCUS, IN THAT ORDER. DAMASCUS MAY BE AN UNUSUAL SUGGESTION, BUT PERHAPS DESERVES A SECOND GLANCE. NO LOCATION IS IDEAL NOR SECURE AGAINST INCONVENIENCE AND EXTRAORDINARY EXPENSE. BUT THESE ARE SOME OF THE POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES THAT MUST BE ACCEPTED BY ANY INSTITUTION THAT WANTS TO DO A JOB IN THE ARAB MIDDLE EAST -- BE IT AN EMBASSY OR A LANGUAGE TRAINING CENTER. END SUMMARY

1. IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE AND A GRAVE SETBACK TO ARABIC LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE IF THE FSI FIELD SCHOOL WERE TO BE ABOLISHED. I DO NOT SEE, IN FACT, SUFFICIENT JUSTIFICATION -- LINGUISTIC, FINANCIAL OR OTHERWISE -- FOR DOING AWAY WITH A FIELD SCHOOL SHORT OF SOME OVERWHELMING CRISIS IN US-ARAB RELATIONS; SUCH A

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CRISIS, HOWEVER, WOULD HAVE TO BE SO GRAVE AS ALMOST TO

PRECLUDE AS WELL THE CONDUCT OF NORMAL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS ANYWHERE IN THE EASTERN ARAB WORLD. (WE HAVE HEARD WITH REGRET THAT MECAS HAS BEEN PERMANENTLY CLOSED, AND THAT THE FACILITY IS BEING RELOCATED TO THE ARABIC LANGUAGE CENTER OF DURHAM UNIVERSITY. BRITISH INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST ARE DWINDLING, AND THEY CAN AFFORD TO GIVE GREATER WEIGHT TO FINANCIAL AND OTHER FACTORS THAN WE. BUT FOR US TO FOLLOW THEIR EXAMPLE AND REVERT TO AN ARAB LANGUAGE/AREA TRAINING PROGRAM OF E.L. BROWNE'S DAYS AND THE LEVANT CONSULAR SERVICE, IS TO LOOK BACKWARDS TO THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, INSTEAD OF FORWARDS.)

2. THE FOREIGN SERVICE CANNOT EXPECT ITS STUDENTS TO LEARN TO SPEAK ARABIC IN WASHINGTON. ONE COULD LEARN TO SPEAK FRENCH, SPANISH, OR GERMAN PRETTY WELL IN THE UNITED STATES. THIS IS BECAUSE THE LANGUAGES ARE ALL CLOSE TO ENGLISH, ARE RECOGNIZED PARTS OF OUR CULTURAL BACKGROUND, AND REQUIRE RELATIVELY MINOR RETOOLING OF OUR COGNITION. ARABIC IS MUCH MORE PAINFUL. NOTHING IS WHAT 20 OR 30 YEARS OF UNCONSCIOUS CONDITIONING TELLS US THAT IT MUST BE. STUDENTS CAN DEVELOP LIMITED READING SKILLS, BUT ONE'S MIND REJECTS THE FUNDAMENTAL AND LARGELY AUTOMATIC ADJUSTMENTS THAT NEED TO BE ESTABLISHED FOR SPOKEN ARABIC. THE WASHINGTON ATMOSPHERE IS JUST NOT SUPPORTIVE ENOUGH FOR THE STUDENT TO CONTINUE TO FEEL THE REALITY AND VALUE OF WHAT HE IS STUDYING AFTER HE HAS GOTTEN OUT OF THE CLASS. THE STUDY OF SPOKEN ARABIC IN WASHINGTON, THEREFORE, IS A VERY DISCONTINUOUS EXPERIENCE, AND WHAT THE STUDENT GETS AT FSI IS LEACHED OUT OF HIM AFTER HOURS. IF ARABIC WERE TAUGHT EXCLUSIVELY IN WASHINGTON, GRADUATES WOULD EMERGE PERHAPS READING AT THE 3 LEVEL, SPEAKING AT THE 2 LEVEL; PROBLEMS OF MOTIVATION THAT STUDENTS EXPERIENCE EVEN IN AN ARAB SOCIETY, WOULD BE GREATER.

3. A STRONG CASE CAN BE MADE FOR CONDUCTING ARABIC LANGUAGE TRAINING EXCLUSIVELY IN THE FIELD, BUT IF INSTRUCTION FROM SOME IS TO BEGIN IN WASHINGTON (AS HAS BEEN DONE UNTIL NOW), THIS TIME COULD USEFULLY BE EMPLOYED IN DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN THOSE STUDENTS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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WHO WILL MAKE GOOD LONG-TERM PROGRESS IN ARABIC, AND THOSE WHO WILL NOT. THE LATTER SHOULD WITHOUT PREJUDICE TO THEIR RECORDS BE SENT OUT TO THE FIELD AT THE END OF AN INITIAL 6 OR 8 MONTHS. TO KEEP SUCH STUDENTS IN TRAINING BEYOND AN EARLY POINT OF SATURATION BUILDS UP FRUSTRATION TOWARD THE LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURE AREA. OTHER STUDENTS--THE MAJORITY--COULD THEN GO ON TO THE FSI FIELD SCHOOL AND BE PUSHED TO WORK AS

THEY HAVE NEVER WORKED BEFORE. THEN TRAINING SHOULD NOT BE INTERRUPTED. IT'S HARD ENOUGH AT ANY TIME GETTING FOREIGN SERVICE PEOPLE TO HOLD STILL TO BE TRAINED--BUT AFTER HAVING SPENT PERHAPS A YEAR IN ARABIC AND THEN SERVING IN THE FIELD, MANY OFFICERS WILL BE RELUCTANT TO CHECK THEIR CAREER MOMENTUM AGAIN FOR MORE FORCED LABOR.

4. IN WHAT ARAB CITY COULD THE FSI LANGUAGE SCHOOL BE RELOCATED, IF BEIRUT IS, INDEED, FINALLY OUT OF THE QUESTION? I WOULD GIVE PREFERENCE TO AMMAN, FOLLOWED BY CAIRO AND DAMASCUS.

A. AMMAN: A PHYSICALLY PLEASANT AND INVIGORATING ARAB TOWN, YET ONE THAT IS NOT OVERLY COSMOPOLITAN. ARABIC CAN BE USED OUT OF CLASS WITH LESS OF A FEELING OF CONSTRAINT THAN IN BEIRUT. THE EAST JORDANIAN/ PALESTINIAN ARABIC PREVAILING THERE HAS LESS LIMITING CONNOTATIONS IN THE EASTERN ARAB WORLD THAN THE LEBANESE DIALECT OF FSI. SHORTAGES AMONG FSI TEACHING STAFF COULD EASILY BE FILLED FROM AMONG JORDAN'S NUMEROUS WILL-QUALIFIED, ENGLISH-SPEAKING, ACADEMIC POPULATION. FOR GOOD STUDENTS, OF COURSE, THE LOCAL DIALECT IS PROBABLY NOT TOO IMPORTANT. AS THEY BECOME MORE PROFICIENT, AND CAN SPEAK ON A GREATER NUMBER OF SUBSTANTIVE MATTERS, IT'S TO BE EXPECTED AND ENCOURAGED THAT ELEMENTS UNIQUE TO THEIR DIALECTICAL POINT OF ORIGIN WOULD GIVE WAY TO ASPECTS OF VOCABULARY, GRAMMAR, AND SYNTAX, THAT HAVE MORE IN COMMON WITH A SPOKEN "MWA." I WOULDN'T BEGIN, HOWEVER, WITH A SPOKEN "MWA"--I THINK YOU START OFF MORE REALISTICALLY WITH FSI'S EXCELLENT METHOD OF AUDIO/REPETITION BY MAKING SOUNDS YOU'LL AFTERWARDS RECOGNIZE AROUND YOU.
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B. CAIRO: WE UNDERSTAND FROM A RECENT MESSAGE FROM AMEMBASSY CAIRO THAT AMBASSADOR EILTS DOES NOT WANT THE OFFICIAL USE PRESENCE TO BECOME MORE SALIENT. IT MAY ALSO BE THAT NO COMMENCE ONE'S ARABIC FIELD EXPERIENCE IN SUCH AN INTENSELY CROWDED URBAN SETTING MIGHT BE DISTRACTING AND ATYPICAL OF ARAB CITIES ELSEWHERE. EGYPTIAN DIALECT, MOREOVER, WHILE ADMIRERD IN MANY AREAS (SUCH AS IN THE HIJAZ), IS LESS GENERALIZED THAN THAT OF AMMAN OR DAMASCUS.

C. DAMASCUS: DAMASCUS AT FIRST GLANCE APPEARS AN UNLIKELY CHOICE FOR SITING FSI. A RADICAL, MILITANT REGIME WITH A LONG RECORD OF HOSTILITY TO US POLICIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST, AND CURRENT DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

WITH US LESS THAN 2 YEARS OLD. BUT FROM A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL POINT OF VIEW, DAMASCUS MAY BE THE BEST CITY OF ALL. MOREOVER, SHORT OF SOME CRISIS THAT COULD LEAD TO ANOTHER BREAK IN RELATIONS, ONCE THE SYRIANS WERE TO ACCEPT FSI IT MIGHT BE MORE SECURE THERE THAN IN CERTAIN OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES. INSTITUTES LIKE FSI TEND TO BE SADDLED ONTO CONSERVATIVE HOST REGIMES THAT MAY BE RELUCTANT TO ACCEPT THEM BUT FEEL THEY CAN'T SAY NO. IF A FIELD SCHOOL COULD WIN ACCEPTANCE BY THE SYRIANS, WE WOULD BE, SO TO SPEAK, IN THE URRICANE'S EYE. THERE WOULD BE LITTLE TALK FROM OTHER STATES ABOUT THE "SUSPICIOUS AMERICAN ARABIC SCHOOL." THIS IS SOMETHING OF LONG-SHOT, BUT DESERVES CONSIDERATION.

5. THE IDEAL FIELD SCHOOL SITE DOES NOT EXIST. ANY PLACE WE GO, WE WOULD HAVE TO ACCPET THE RISK OF THE SCHOOL'S PROGRAM BEING VULNERABLE TO POLITICAL UNREST AND UPHEAVAL. THIS IS A PART OF THE MIDDLE EAST, AND FSI'S PROGRAMS CANNOT REMAIN DETACHED FROM THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT SO OFTEN TROUBLE EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES. BUT THE MIDDLE EAST IS ALSO WHERE THE ARABS ARE AND THAT IS THE BEST PLACE TO STUDY ARABIC. A STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL OF FSI TO WASHINGTON WOULD SAVE MONEY, AND ASSURE MUCH MORE ADMINISTRATIVE STABILITY THAN IS POSSIBLE IN THE FIELD, BUT IT WOULD BE AT A HIGH PRICE: THE LANGUAGE RESOURCES OF THE FOREIGN SERVICE WOULD LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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BE DEGRADED AND USEFULNESS OF FUTURE ARABISTS TO THE USG WOULD DIMINISH.
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